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SUBJECT: (SBU) EUROPEAN UNION ASSESSES SUPPORT TO NATIONAL PARKS

1.(SBU) Summary: The European Union has supported a selected number of national parks in Central Africa beginning in 1992 through a series of projects termed by the French acronym ECOFAC (Conservation and Valuing Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa).

The current phase, ECOFAC IV, is nearing the final stage and therefore the European Commission (EC) held a broad-ranging discussion and review of the progress, challenges and next steps in Brazzaville on December 9-10. ECOFAC IV targeted 8 national parks in 7 Central African countries including the UN-designated Biosphere Reserve Odzala National Park in Northeastern Republic of Congo, a park noted for large populations of western lowland gorillas and forest elephants. So far none of the models attempted by ECOFAC show promise of being either financially or technically sustainable, though recently they have made considerable effort to develop means to support local communities in an attempt to reduce poaching and environmental degradation in and around park areas (End Summary).

2.(SBU) ECOFAC supports the Congo Basin Forest Partnership

The EC implements the ECOFAC project through a single European technical assistance consulting company procured through a competitive contract for which the contractor deploys personnel to support the targeted park network. A management team is based in Libreville, Gabon and expatriate technical advisers are posted to each of the targeted parks. Each of the four ECOFAC phases has involved separate contract solicitations through a tedious and lengthy process, accompanied by numerous contract disputes and slow mobilization of personnel. These processes have caused long gaps when little support or no has been available. The EC was prepared to terminate the program after ECOFAC III, but with the CBFP launching, was convinced to continue its involvement as a CBFP founding member.

3.(SBU) The EC Takes Stock

The meeting was billed as a regional technical monitoring committee session to compare notes on activities over the past three years of the ECOFAC IV project, to assess project status toward reaching the objectives and sharing technical lessons with ECOFAC staff, national park staff and park services managers of the seven countries Central Africa Republic, Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome Principe). A selected number of invited participants, including the USAID/Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE) director were invited. A second day closed session was limited to the actual implementing partners, but was to focus on future financing methods and to consider how the investments can become technically and financially sustainable.

4.(SBU) RAPAC to the Rescue?

The EC has established a regional NGO based in Libreville known by its French acronym RAPAC (Network for the Protected Areas of Central Africa) with the view of using it to channel funding directly to the national administrations of the targeted parks. Now in its seventh year, the EC hopes that for any future EC financial support, the RAPAC channel will bypass the tedious and ineffective contracting systems that have been fraught with difficulties and are widely considered to result in disruptive and ineffective support. While it is not clear whether RAPAC will be tapped by the EC to take on this role at the end of ECOFAC IV, the RAPAC clearly has ambitions to play a much larger role. RAPAC has been accepted as a subsidiary organization under the Ministerial Commission for Central African Forests (COMIFAC), and therefore it is politically poised to play a more active role in regional protected area management. (Comment: RAPAC remains a very weak organization and it is highly unlikely it will have the capacity in the near term to play a significant technical role, and its capacity to manage finances is also not yet tested).

5.(SBU) Sustainability is Elusive

The technical presentations painted a disappointing picture of both the technical and financially sustainability of ECOFAC efforts to date. A great deal of concern was registered over the fragile nature of the two parks in Central African Republic, given extremely strong poaching and human pressures in the surrounding areas and the lack of alternative livelihoods for the thousands of poor rural villagers who have increasingly surrounded the parks, apparently creating extreme pressure on both the wildlife and the forests. Suppression of wildlife and wood harvesting of the local people through ecoguard patrols has reportedly resulted in ever increasing hostility toward park

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authorities and more difficulties. In the last few years, ECOFAC has increasingly tried to find means to provide more alternative opportunities to village residents through tourism, for example safari hunting revenue sharing (Note: one French-owned safari company, RED Buffalo CAR has developed a scheme in northern CAR with ECOFAC support whereby tourist hunting revenue is paid directly to local village organizations). One of the parks with fewer local resident pressures is the Odzala National Park in NE ROC. This is part of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership TRIDOM landscape with major technical and financial support through CARPE partner Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in the community zones and a major logging concession by the Danzer group in contiguous areas to the south and east of the park. (Comment: WCS believes that the CARPE support and the collaboration with the private logging companies in the periphery of Odzala have played a much more important role in maintaining wildlife populations in the park than the ECOFAC park activities. End Comment).

6.(SBU) The way forward

The EC would like to continue to support the park development in Central Africa though they have not found a sustainable formula after nearly 20 years since the first ECOFAC phase. The EC is also supporting protected areas through bilateral programs in ROC (a project to develop a new government park and wildlife service) and the DRC (direct euro 50 million over five years for four major parks (Garamba, Virunga, Salonga and Upemba). They have tried several models including contracting park management to the NGO Africa Parks in the case of Garamba and direct support to the DRC park service in Virunga. A financially and technically sustainable model is still not on the horizon, though the region is rich in different models which are expected to serve as a laboratory for the long term.

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